

DEADMALL

John Boston

Matt McKinley didn't understand why he was there. It really made no sense. He was standing in an empty mall store with his partner, Gus.

"You want us to remove all of the CAT% wire in here and use it at the store's new location? Wouldn't it just be cheaper to install new cable at the new location?"

"I don't know guys. I just rent the store space out. They had it in their contract, so we have to honor it. I don't know who signed the contract, I would never have agreed to it, but I'm not in charge." said the property manager named Wilcox.

"How much cable are we talking about here?" asked Gus

"I have no idea. Whatever is in here, has to go."

"This space is massive. It spans two floors and an elevator. It could take us days to remove all of it."

"I'm going to need your bid by the end of today if you don't mind," said Wilcox, holding a clipboard.

"Can you give us a few hours? I'd like to know what we're biting off here," said Matt.

"It was an arcade. It seems that every machine was plugged into a main server. Ten years ago, they spent a small fortune on CAT% cable. I guess they want to re-use it." said Wilcox.

"We'll give you a call when we're done."

Wilcox got the picture and left Matt and Gus by themselves. They were both thinking the same thing.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"What are you thinking?"

"A giant pain in the ass for not a whole lot of money."

"This could take us weeks. Do they want it all done in ten days? I don't know, Matt. I know we need the money, but we've never done a cable pull before. All I hear is horror stories." said Gus

"I hear you, Gus. The fact of the matter is, we are going to be out of business unless we get some business, you hear me?"

"Twenty thousand. That's you, me, and the kids."

"I don't think they're going to bite at twenty. We are going to have to cut out some of the walls and ceiling if they did it right. That means we're going to need Stoner and his crew. We would break even at twenty. I'm thinking forty."

"Matt, if they won't bite at twenty, what the hell makes you think they'll bite at forty?" asked Gus.

"If we take the job at twenty, they'll know we're desperate. Every other bid will be higher."

"We are desperate."

"We are, but that's the last thing I want Wilcox to know. Tell him we can work around the clock if we have to. No one else will agree on the ten days. If those are his terms, he won't have any takers but us."

"You really think we can do it in ten days?"

"We're going to have to. Let's see what we're working with," said Matt as he climbed the ladder and removed the ceiling panel.

"Just as I feared.....they did everything correctly. This is going to be a nightmare. Screw him. Let's say forty five and our red line is forty."

"You're the boss," said Gus

Wilcox didn't even seem to hesitate. He agreed to forty thousand for the job. They were to remove all the cable, tag it, and place it in a trailer to be delivered to their new address. Matt was fired up but knew he had an immovable deadline staring him right in the face. For every day they went over the deadline, it cost them five thousand dollars. Needless to say, finishing late was simply not an option. He called his two helpers, Chris and Steve, and told them there was a hefty paycheck in it for them if they showed up early and worked hard.

"They're going to be long days. Plan on twelve-hour days, maybe longer," he said.

"You guys ever done a cable pull before? It's a nightmare," said Chris

"So, is watching your business fail. In case you guys haven't noticed, we're not exactly drowning in work these days."

The Sandy Hills Mall was once the pride of Englewood. That was twenty years ago. Like most Malls, it was struggling to survive in 2024. It was not yet a dead mall, but sales had been declining every year for the last ten. It had around fifty stores, including one of the best sneaker shops in the area. The food court still had plenty of restaurants and during the school year when

the local college was full of students, the mall did okay. It was sold in 2018 to a new management group that was trying to turn it around, so they could sell it to another group of investors. They promised new stores would come in and had a revitalization plan they sold to the city. Six years later, only two new stores had come in. The arcade had been a big attraction when the mall opened. In the last few months before it closed, they were lucky to have ten customers a day. It had been a COVID-19 vaccination center during the height of the pandemic.

"I remember when this mall opened. Christine and I had just gotten married. That was in 2002. Malls used to be packed back then. Look at it now. I'd be surprised if there's even a hundred people in here." said Gus

"I don't even know why malls are still around. If I owned a mall, I'd put a grocery store or bank in it. Maybe even a gas station. Most of these stores are just pointless. I'd give this place three years, tops." said Steve.

"Everyone blames the internet for the demise of the mall, but I think there's more to it than that. I think malls are dying because the middle class is dying," said Matt.

"That sneaker store, WALKABOUT is awesome. I've gotten some great kicks there over the years."

"Yeah, that's one store that needs to stay. I could spend hours in there. I'm not a sneaker guy, but man, I could be after going in there."

"You two couldn't even afford the gas to get here. Why would you spend money you don't have on sneakers?" said Gus

"Gus, you're old, you wouldn't understand," said Chris

"I'm older, not old. There is a difference."

"If you say so," said Chris

"I heard rumors about something going down tonight in the mall," said Steve

"What do you mean?"

"Flash mobs. Dozens, if not hundreds of people just bust into a store and loot it."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"No, really. They've been doing it all over. I'm surprised no one has hit this mall yet."

"Is this a real thing?" asked Matt

"Yeah. I got a DM about it from a buddy of mine. He says he's going."

"Your friend is a looter?" asked Gus

"No, he just records and then puts it online for everyone to see."

"That's even worse. The hell is the matter with you kids?" asked Matt

"Matt, everyone my age is broke. The ones who went to college to get a degree and a great job, they're the brokest ones of all. Not only do they have no job, they got all that student loan debt they have to pay back. I guess they figure, they got nothing to lose."

"I fail to see how stealing a pair of sneakers is going to help them," said Matt.

"They just turn around and sell them for money. No one actually keeps it. They don't want to get caught with stolen merchandise. I hear WALKABOUT now puts these tracking devices in their boxes in case they get robbed. Some of those sneakers are big money."

"Let's just hope they don't rob us. You guys know you can't leave the store. We get locked in and can only leave out the back door. There's a bathroom in the office we can use. This job is going to suck, but it's only ten days, then we're out of here. I need you guys to hustle. If we go over the deadline, we lose a lot of money."

"I got you, Matt. We'll take care of you. I did a pull once on that old office building downtown. That was a nightmare. I had to get lowered onto the ceiling with a rope and harness. Not fun."

"At some point, I'm going to have to bring in Stoner. I know he's kind of a pain in the ass, but he works quick."

"Matt.....Chris and I just want you to know one thing before we start."

"What's that?"

"You are going to actually pay us, right?"

"Of course, why would you say that?"

"You know why."

"That was just a simple mistake. You guys are still holding that over my head?" said Matt.

"Your check bounced. Took you over a week to get us our money. As soon as he hands you the money, you hand us the money, are we clear?" said Steve.

"I'll pay you guys, don't worry. I've always paid you."

"No, you've always gotten around to paying us. We want to get paid on time, like everyone else."

"Guys, we don't run that kind of an operation here, you know that," said Gus.

"Matt, your chick came into the bar the other night. She was bitching about bad business is. She gave us such a sob story, that people actually bought her beers. I mean, the way she tells it, your business is on thin ice."

"Matty drinks too much and runs her mouth. You know that."

"Even drunks can be right once in a while," said Chris.

The four of them began work that morning around ten AM. They worked until four PM, then stopped for lunch or early dinner. It was slow, methodical work. They first had to identify all of the cables, tag it, and then free them up so they could pull them. Pulling wasn't easy, since most of it had been zip-tied to something during the installation. Fortunately, most of the zip ties were old and brittle and would snap easily. Chris and Steve were working hard and there was simply no way the job would be done in time without them. As soon as the kids were out of sight, Gus sat down next to Matt and started drinking his soda.

"Matt.....tell me we're okay. I mean, I just need to hear it from you. I hope you understand."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Matt, I haven't gotten a paycheck in over a month. If it weren't for Christine's job, I don't think I could be here. The kids are going to be starting college next year and um.....I may need to make a move. The college was hiring for an IT person and I put in an application."

"Gus, Jesus.....you've been with me for over ten years."

"Matt. I like you, it's nothing personal. We're network engineers and look what we're doing. We haven't actually done any real networking in over a year. The money just isn't there anymore. I know you sacrificed everything to build this up, but I got to do what's best for me."

"It feels like you're breaking up with me," said Matt.

"Matt, you got to be able to read the writing on the wall. It's not 2004 anymore. The economy out there sucks. It's not getting any easier."

"Gus, I know we're in a rough patch here. We've had plenty of them. I went five months without a paycheck in 2009, right after the crash. In 2012, I made almost two hundred thousand dollars. Things will pick up. I've already got bids in for that new office complex just outside of town. I just need you to hold out for a few more weeks."

"Matt, the college offered me the job. I have to take it. This is going to be my last job with you. I hope you understand. I need health insurance and a retirement. I'm not getting any younger."

Matt was floored. How the hell was he supposed to find someone to replace Gus and all of his experience? He knew Gus was being underpaid, but it was the best Matt could do.

"You got to do what you got to do. I can't hold that against you. I just wish you had said something sooner."

"I hadn't made up my mind until this morning. I've been with you since the beginning. I didn't want to leave, but I had no choice. We're drowning in debt, Matt. Things are getting very hard for us. I don't have any choice."

Matt nodded. He shook Gus's hand. He and Gus have had their ups and downs over the years, but this hit hard. He didn't know what he was going to do after this job. Replacing Gus was going to be impossible. He didn't have the money to hire anyone else. This put Matt in a really rough spot.

What the hell was he supposed to do now? Losing Gus was akin to him losing an arm or leg. He could ask the kids if they wanted to go on full-time, but that was no guarantee. The two of them put together were still no Gus. This day was going from bad to worse.....only it was going to get much, much, worse.

The mall was still fairly busy by almost eight o'clock that evening. The four of them had been working pretty much nonstop. Matt and Gus knew they had to pace themselves. They were not twenty-three years old anymore. Chris and Steve came up to Matt as he was pulling a long line of cable through a PVC pipe.

"Boss, can we take lunch?" asked Christine

"Yeah. Go ahead. You guys okay with working late?"

"We figured we were, that's why we're asking."

"Okay, just make sure you guys lock that door. This is the only key, so don't lose it. We are locked in here until you get back."

"You guys want anything?"

Matt knew where this was going. He gave him twenty bucks to get something for him and Gus. He was hungry. He figured Gus was too. This was going to be a late night for everyone.

He and Gus were basically locked in the empty store until the two of them got back. He had to promise Wilcox that the back door would be locked at all times. They have been having repeated break-ins and the last thing anyone wanted was homeless people in the empty store after closing. He made sure Chris locked the door and he and Gus went back to work. He could sense the awkwardness between the two.

"Don't suppose I could talk you out of it?"

"No, it's not something I decided overnight."

"I could give you more money?"

"Matt, you don't have any money.....that's the problem," said Gus

"Gus, we've been through hard times before, we've always pulled through."

"Matt, you're an eternal optimist, that's what I love about you. Your refusal to meet reality on its terms is quite impressive. I love you to death, but you're delusional. There's just no way for us to make it anymore. It's nothing you've done wrong, or I've done wrong.....it's this damn government. It's almost like they want people like us to fail. We've been out of high school for what.....thirty years? In that time, has our country done one single thing that's made it any better? Just one? The government doesn't work for people like you and me, they work for the billionaires and trillionaires, that's it. They don't even pretend like they care about us."

"What do you want to do Gus? Just throw in the towel and live on the streets?"

"Sometimes I wonder who the crazy ones really are. Them or us? Sometimes I think trying to live the lives we do is just plain nuts."

"Gus, we're just in a rough patch, you can't just give up now," said Matt

"Matt, there comes a point in every man's life when he realizes that no matter what he does, no matter how hard he tries, he's just never going to make it. I watched my dad bust his ass at that factory for thirty years. He had a nice pension, and a comfortable retirement. It was all gone in six months once he got sick. They had to sell the house I was born in to survive. It wasn't the cancer that killed him, it was losing everything he's ever worked for."

Matt had never seen this side of Gus before. He was usually cheery and almost goofy. Matt liked having him around. He made everyone laugh and was a yin to his yang. He knew things were tough for Gus, he just had no idea how tough they were.

"Gus, I know we can get through this. If we can survive 08-09, we can survive this."

"Matt, we were both basically unemployed for a year. That was no picnic. If it weren't for Christine's parents, we would have lost the house. I'm not going back to those days. We had to use a food bank to survive."

Matt and Gus stopped and looked up at the commotion across the mall. Dozens of people were now rushing into the giant sneaker store, WALKABOUT and looting anything they could get their hands on. It was total chaos as mall security attempted to stop them but were quickly overpowered. Matt and Gus stopped what they were doing and looked at the mob scene in front of them. The looters were zeroed in on the sneaker store. They didn't even seem to notice Matt or Gus.

"Kind of strange how the two of them just decided to take lunch right at this exact moment, huh?" said Gus

"I was thinking the same thing," said Matt

The looters all had their faces covered. There were so many of them, he lost count.

"Should we even both call the cops?"

"Not our problem, Gus. Besides, I'm sure the store has good insurance."

The two of them turned to go back to work. They both had their backs turned when Matt heard it zip by them. It hit the wall and left a spark. They both stopped dead in their tracks. A moment later, the entire mall was engulfed in a deafening roar of gunfire. He could hear the bullets zipping by them, going through the thin sheetrock. They both dove for cover behind the genie lift and tried to shield themselves.

"Maybe we call the cops now?" asked a shell-shocked Gus.

Matt took out his phone and dialed 911. He patiently told the operator what was happening. He could barely hear her over the roar of the automatic gunfire. He looked around the corner and could see two bodies lying motionless in front of the security gate.

"Jesus, lady.....send everybody you got, this is nuts!"

The 911 operator told him that units were on their way.

They both watched two hooded men in what looked to be full body armor just calmly walking around and shooting at anything that moved. They walked past a woman holding her two children and shot a looter trying to run down the hallway.

"You're going to need some major firepower. These guys have automatic weapons and body armor.

Matt pointed to the main breaker panel. Gus ran over to it and turned off the power, causing the giant empty room to go totally dark. It wasn't much, but it gave them some protection. The 911 operator told them to stay on the line and to stay put. As if Matt needed to be told that. He and Gus decided to make a break for it and run to the offices on the second floor. They would have a much better vantage point and could see what was happening. The door was locked, but Matt simply kicked it in.

"Matt, we gotta get the hell out of here!" said a panicked Gus

"How? The back door is locked. We're stuck in here."

"Maybe we can kick it out or something. We stay in here, we're dead."

Matt and Gus ran down the stairs to the back door. It was locked. They had a large hammer with them and tried desperately to force the door open, but it wouldn't budge. They kept hitting the glass, but the hammer simply bounced off.

"Shatterproof glass.....goddammit!" said Matt.

"The hell are we going to do Matt? We're sitting ducks up in those offices. If they get in here, we have to be able to run."

"Run, where?"

"Anywhere."

The gunfire had now almost stopped. They could hear gunfire outside and Matt could see flashing police lights through a small window. He also watched a police officer get hit with gunfire and fly backward. This was getting very real, very quickly.

He called Chris, then Steve. He got no response, but then Steve called him back.

"Boss, what the hell is going in there?" asked Steve

"It's bad Steve. Real bad. We need you to come unlock this door. Gus and I can't open it, we're trapped in here."

"Why, what the hell is going on?"

"Just get back here and open this fucking door!"

"Matt, the cops got the whole area sealed off. We can't drive in there, we're going to have to sneak in. We're at least a mile away from the parking lot now."

"Look, I am not going to die in here, get your ass back here and unlock this door!"

"Okay.....we're just going to need some time to figure out how to get past all these cops."

"Just hurry.....I don't know how much longer we have."

Matt hung up and Gus bent down to look at the door.

"I know we can break this glass.

"Gus.....I don't want them to think anyone is in here. If they get in here, we're dead."

"We can't just stay in here, Matt."

The mall was now almost silent, except for the music playing overhead on the intercom. Gus knew he was right, but Matt did have a very good point. Maybe the shooters knew they were in the store, maybe they did some scouting beforehand. There were just too many unknowns at this point. They both knew that unless they got out of there, they were as good as dead.

"If you got any ideas boss, now's the time to say it."

"The plan is not to die."

"Good, I was kind of thinking the same thing."

"Maybe the shooters left."

"Yeah and go where?"

"Something tells me this wasn't just a spur-of-the-moment type of idea. I think this has been in the works for a long time."

"So what? We just sit back and wait for the cavalry to get here?"

"Something like that?"

"I can have this door open in two minutes."

"You could also alert them that we're here."

"Something tells me they already know we're here."

"Maybe we can pry it open?"

"No way, the frame is all metal. The only way is to knock out the glass. No way can we just wait it out in here, that's crazy."

"Gus.....maybe we can save some of these people."

"I don't know."

"Years ago, before I started the business, I did EMT training. I even did six months on an ambulance crew. Maybe I could help some of them."

"You don't have any supplies or medical equipment?"

"Even a homemade tourniquet might save somebody's life. All we have to do is slow the bleeding."

"Matt, that's very noble, but if we go out there, we're dead too."

"You'd just let these people die?"

"Matt, you're not thinking clearly. We didn't kill them. If you want to play hero, go ahead. I'm staying put." said Gus

"No, you stay here. I can't can't sit around and wait. I have to do something."

"Matt, if you go out there, you're going to get killed. It's suicide."

"Staying in here is suicide. These people might need our help."

"The gate is down, how the hell are you going to get out?"

"That access panel above the gate. It's been taken out. I can use a ladder to get up there and crawl down the gate."

"How are you going to get back in?"

"I'm not. I'm going to find a way out of here."

Gus shook his head. They would occasionally hear gunfire followed by screams and shouting. It was literally, *an occasional hell*.

Ten minutes passed. More screams followed by gunfire. They both knew the shooters were just picking off the survivors one by one."

"I don't get it, where the hell are the cops?"

"Probably in the same boat we're in. Not enough firepower to go up against these guys. How many cops do you think Englewood has?"

"I don't know, maybe fifty?"

"How many shooters are out there?"

"I don't know. Maybe a dozen?"

"A dozen with machine guns and God knows what else? I saw a cop get killed. His body is still out there, they can't get close enough to move it. That's how bad things are." said Matt.

He called 911 but was only passed around until he got a 911 operator in Omaha. She said that all units were responding to *multiple shootings*. As soon as Matt heard that. He hung up. He knew they were on their own in here.

"It's not just here. Others are happening too."

"What? Where?"

"I don't know, Gus. 911 is pretty much down. We're on our own in here."

He and Gus sat down. They knew that every decision they made, they were going to have to deal with for the rest of their lives. Matt knew he couldn't ask Gus to follow him outside the store. He had a family to think about. Matt had no one except a girlfriend he didn't even like. He just couldn't stand the thought of knowing there was something he could have done to save their lives.

"Matt, the only reason we're still alive is cause there aren't any cameras in here. I think they're in the control room just looking at the cameras. You go out here, you're a dead man."

"It's my decision, Gus."

"Maybe it shouldn't be. Look, in the last year, I've lost my dad, my uncle, and two of my good friends. I don't want to lose you too." he said with tears in his eyes.

Matt put his hand on Gus's shoulder. He didn't know what to say. He only knew what his heart was telling him to do. His heart was saying, help them."

"You're really going out there. You're going to commit suicide?"

"It's just something I got to do. I hope you understand."

"Oh, I understand. I still think it's stupid. Do you have a plan or are you just going to wing it?"

"Probably just wing it. I'm not much of a planner. That was your specialty." said Matt.

"Matt, please don't go out there. You won't last five minutes."

Matt got up and walked over to the ladder. He picked it up and carried it to the small access panel above the security gate. It would be tight, but Matt wasn't very big. He was still in pretty good shape. He climbed up the ladder and turned himself around. He scrambled for a few seconds before finding his footing. He lowered himself down onto the gate and slowly climbed down. He hit the floor and took off. He turned and saw Brian tearfully waving goodbye.

"You're going to get killed, you idiot," he said

"Probably."

"You got any kind of a plan?"

"Help people and not get killed."

"That's not much of a plan," said Gus

Matt darted around corners until he came to the first two bodies lying on the ground. They were both cold to the touch. He made his way over to several other bodies lying motionless on the ground. There were blood and spent shell casings everywhere. It was the worst thing he had ever seen. He saw two men approaching and immediately laid down in a pool of blood. He looked over and could see that man was still alive, but barely. The men carrying machine guns walked past Matt. When he thought they were gone, he rolled over and wiped the blood off him.

"Hey.....mister.....over here!"

Matt looked and could see a young black boy and girl huddled around a corner. Matt made certain he was in the clear, then made a break for it. He heard a burst of gunfire down the hallway. They were now just hunting for survivors. Matt knew if he made one wrong move he was a dead man. He ran over to the kids and pulled them down the hallway into the restrooms.

"Are you kids alright?"

They both nodded.

"How many are there?"

"I'm not sure. We think six or seven.....but there are more outside. They're shooting at the cops, man!"

"Okay.....we have two choices and none of them are very good. We can try and find a way out of here and make a run for it, or find a place to hide until help comes here. What's it gonna be?"

"There ain't no help coming. Right before this went down, I got a text from my cousin. He was with the group that stormed the other mall. They are doing the same thing over there, except there's more of them. I think he's dead. He won't answer my calls or my texts." said Marcus trying his best not to break down in front of a complete stranger.

"Okay, then, we plan to make a break for it. There's got to be plenty of doors here where we can force open," said Matt

"You don't have to force any of them open. The problem is, if we open the doors, the alarm goes off and tells them right where we are," said Jenae

"What do you mean?"

"The emergency exits all have alarms on them. We'd be taking one hell of a risk."

"Well, then we got to find a door that doesn't have an alarm on it."

"What the hell do you think we have been doing for the last hour?"

"What are your names?" asked Matt

"Marcus.....this is my cousin, Jenae."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Matt. Look, I know this is scary, but I think we can get out of this mess, we just have to plan our next step very carefully."

"Those motherfuckers killed all my friends. I'm not leaving here until I take some of them out," he said angrily. Jenae just rolled her eyes and threw her hands up in the air.

"Marcus, you try and do that, there's a very good chance you'll be killed. I've seen enough dead bodies tonight, I don't need to add to the list."

"Easy for you to say, you don't know any of these people. These were my people. I grew up with them. I can't just run away and let these bastards get away with this, no way."

"Marcus, will you listen to him? He's right. You try and take these guys on, you're going to get yourself killed. You want me to have to explain that one to your momma?" said Jenae.

"Marcus, I understand you're upset, but the reality is, if you stay here and fight them, you're going to die. I never said you can't get your revenge, just not right now, not with these odds."

Marcus sat down on the toilet and started to sob. Matt didn't really know what to do. There was no manual for this type of situation. You just had to trust your gut.

"They killed my boy Rudy. He died right in front of me. He tried to scream, but only blood came out of his mouth. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget that sound of him fighting to breathe." he said between sobs.

"Marcus, you seem like a smart kid. I want these bastards dead too, but we have to be realistic. We are in no position to fight them. We don't even have any weapons. Right now, we're just easy targets."

"This sucks man, this friggin sucks. All I wanted to do was get some new kicks. Nobody had to get shot over it. The stupid store had insurance anyway. They were going to get reimbursed for everything we took."

"None of that matters now, all that matters is we get out here, alive. I thought for some reason I could help in some way. Who the hell am I trying to kid? A miracle worker couldn't save these people. I have a co-worker trapped in that store across the hallway. The damn door is locked. I've got to get him out of there. I have to get past the police line and get the key from my other workers. He stays in there, he's going to be found and killed. I can't let that happen."

"Man, we both picked the wrong night to come to this mall," said Marcus wiping away his tears.

The sound of automatic gunfire echoed throughout the mall. Jenae covered her ears.

We came in through the office doors. No, the main doors. I wonder if we can still get out that way?"

"My mom just texted me. She used to work in the mall. That's where she said to go. There are a few doors we can use around the offices." said Jenae.

"Where are they?"

"On the other side of the mall. The back hallway stops in front of the food court. We'd have to cross the hallway and hope the other door isn't locked. It's kind of risky." said Jenae

"There's got to be another way. What about the roof?"

"They have people on the roof. They use walkie-talkies. They're pretty high-tech."

"Let's stay in the back hallway. I can't believe a mall this size doesn't have more exits. We may have to set off the alarm. We can run right into the parking lot and hide around the cars. All we have to do is make it through the parking lot and we can run right out onto the street." said Matt.

The three of them walked slowly down the access hallway used by mallworkers. They were listening for the sound of footsteps. Listening for the sound of their deaths. They knew they were probably being watched, there were cameras everywhere. Maybe somehow, the security room was secured and they didn't have access to the cameras. Wishful thinking, but possible. They turned the corner and saw a man jump out in front of them. He was holding a pistol. Matt could see the old man was as scared as they were. He felt better knowing that.

"Relax man, we aren't the shooters," Matt said

The man put down his gun and put it in the small holster he was wearing.

"The mall banned concealed carry five years ago. Good thing I didn't pay any attention," he said.

"I'm Matt, this is Marcus and Jenae."

"Bill.....Bill Watson. Am I glad to see you guys? I hate being outgunned. Fortunately, those guys couldn't shoot worth a shit, otherwise, I'd be dead too."

"Did you recognize any of them?" asked Matt

"No, they all had their faces covered. I did hit one of them in the arm. I saw him drop his weapon and grab his arm. They're down one."

"Any idea as to how we can get out of here?" asked Matt

"No. I'm afraid if I open one of these doors, the alarm will go off." I passed by a door earlier that led right outside, but it was locked. I thought about shooting the glass out, but I decided against it. There has to be more ways out of here."

The four of them heard footsteps and immediately hid behind a bunch of trash cans and old displays.

"*Copy that. They're in the hallway somewhere, we'll find them.*" said a man on his radio. Matt could see he was carrying an AR-15 with a giant ammo drum attached to it.

"*You guys have five minutes. After that, we need to follow through with the rest of the plan.*"

Matt had to wonder what they meant by *the rest of the plan*. What else were they going to do?

The man walked past them and continued on down the hallway. That was just a little too close for comfort.

"Where's that door?"

"Right around the other corner," said Bill

"Do you know anything? I mean what the hell is happening out there?" asked Matt

"They left calling cards," said Bill as he handed Matt a small business card.

THE HAND OF GOD

"What the hell does this mean?"

"You got me. Looks like a bunch of religious wackos with machine guns," added Bill

"Religious nuts and machine guns.....hell of a combination," added Marcus

"They go together about as well as guns and alcohol. You think we can make it to that door?"

"Yeah, I do."

The four of them quickly hurried down the hallway to the other door. Matt could see a street light outside. He pushed on the door and could see it was dead-bolted.

"Here!" he said and pointed to a large cinder block. He picked it up and held it in his arms.

"How many shots to break through?" he asked Bill

"I don't know man. You sure this is going to work?" he replied

"We'll find out in a minute. Shoot the glass, not the lock."

Bill aimed his pistol and fired four shots at the glass. It went right through but did not shatter. Matt threw the block as hard as he could at the glass. It finally broke apart and they were able to crawl through. Matt was the last one. Bill turned and looked at him.

"The hell are you waiting for?"

"Go, don't wait for me. I've got to stay here. I'm going to kill these bastards."

"Are you nuts? Come on."

"I can't Bill. God wants me here to help as many as I can."

"Do you have a death wish?"

"Go ahead. My girlfriend is named Matty. Matt and Matty, we're a hell of a pair. Been together for almost five years now. Do me a favor and tell her I love her.....please?"

"You can leave right now and tell her yourself."

Matt heard some commotion in the hallway. He ran back around the pile of cinder blocks and waited.

He didn't have to wait long as one of the shooters came in. He walked right by Matt.

"Looks like we got a few stragglers. You want me to go after them?" he asked into his radio

"Leave them. Meet us at the rally point."

The man never saw Matt bring the cinder block down on top of his head. He dropped his gun. Matt grabbed it and squeezed the trigger. Two of the rounds struck the man in his neck, killing him instantly.

Matt collapsed against the hallway and slid down onto his butt. He couldn't believe he had just killed a man.....an evil man, but a man nonetheless. He picked up the man's radio from his dead body.

"Now, I got a gun too," he said holding the radio.

Not only did he have a gun with lots of bullets, he had one of their radios. This changed things considerably. He was badly outnumbered, but he was determined to take as many of them down with him as he could. He wasn't just worrying about saving victims.*he was now out for revenge against the demons who did this.*

He ran down the hallway until he came to a set of double doors. He pushed them open as he readied his weapon.

Matt McKinley was not about to go down without a fight.

The doors led into the food court. Matt crouched behind the counter and made his way over to a small opening. He had a pretty good view of the surrounding area. He rested for a moment and turned down the volume on the radio, not wanting to give his position away. He crawled behind another counter and went back into the kitchen area. He could still see much of the cafe area and it would be difficult to see him. He saw half a dozen police officers running toward the center of the food court. He also saw three hooded figures take refuge and point their rifles at them. Matt knew he had to do something. Those officers were about to walk right into an ambush.

"GET BACK! IT'S AN AMBUSH!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. The officers stopped and immediately took cover. Two of the figures opened fire, striking one of the officers and killing him instantly. The officers fired back but were badly outgunned. Matt knew if he didn't intervene, they would all be killed. He ran over to the front of the serving area and opened fire on the hooded figures. One of them returned fire, with a bullet narrowly missing his head. Matt kept firing. It gave the officers enough time to regroup and get the hell out of there. He was in a bad spot now, outmanned and outgunned. One of the officers threw him a flash-bang grenade. Matt knew it was now or never. He ran behind the serving areas until he reached the point where he was only ten feet from where he thought they were. He pulled the pin and tossed the grenade over the seating area into the small fountain. He covered his ears and was glad he did. The noise was deafening. He saw one of the men stand up, holding his ear. Matt fired on him and killed him. The other man scrambled for his gun, but Matt beat him to the punch. He fired a shot that hit the masked man in his vest. Matt's second shot hit him right in the face, killing him instantly.

"I just killed two of your buddies," he said into the radio.

"Sorry to hear Matt. You know there's a very old saying in the bible.....*it goes something like an eye for an eye.*" said a familiar voice over the radio

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Since you've kind of inserted yourself into this equation and become a player in the game, all is fair in love and war.....and we are at war."

"You're just another asshole with a cause.....the world is full of them. How do you know my name?" he asked, somewhat shocked at how personal this had become.

"We know everybody working at this mall. We know you have a drunk of a girlfriend.....what's her name? Oh yes, it's Matty."

"Fine, since you know so much about me, how about we meet and have a little chat?"

"I don't think that would be very productive." said a voice behind him.

Matt turned and could see half a dozen men with their weapons pointed right at him. They grabbed him and led him into the center of the mall where most of the bodies were, right in front of the sneaker store. They saw someone running and were quickly gunned down. They made Matt kneel in front of a pile of dead bodies. There was so much blood on the marble flooring, that he had a hard time keeping his balance. The leader of the group spoke to Matt first.

"Do you know why you're still alive?"

"No idea."

"WE are God's chosen people. We are the ones who will cleanse the Earth. The Rapture is about to commence. All these things have been written about.....and they will soon come to pass."

"Are you guys a cult or something? You don't strike me as normal, everyday type folks," he said, not daring to look up at the man who had a gun pointed at his head.

"We're your neighbors, Matt. You probably know all of us." said another masked man.

"Clearly, I don't really know any of you. How the hell can you all live with yourselves knowing what you've done?" he asked

"The wages of sin is death, Matt.....your job is not to understand, it is simply to accept. That's all we're asking you to do.....just accept and move on."

"Accept and move on, huh? You people are the scum of the Earth. Every whacko asshole in history has hid behind God to try and justify their actions. It always ends the same way. You're just another group of assholes.....God has nothing to do with this.

Matt could see the officers taking up firing positions behind the group of men. None of them heard or saw the officers. They had all their attention focused on him. That's exactly what Matt wanted. The cavalry was finally here. He also knew there was zero chance of these guys surrendering. He had to make his move and hope the cops followed suit.

"Matt, you know God is hardest on his followers, on the true believers, they are the ones that suffer most in this world. You think we're monsters. We're not the ones who start wars and drop bombs on people or put sanctions on countries and starve their populations. We're the ones who are trying to stop all of this. We are doing God's work on Earth. Is it better to be feared or loved? I'm not sure if Jesus knew the answer to that question either."

"You know.....my dad had a saying. He used to say that *when you start to believe your own bullshit, well, then you're really in trouble*," said Matt as he saw dozens of heavily armed officers surround the group.

They all turned and saw the massive display of firepower in front of them. There were dozens of red dots all over them.

"DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER. YOU HAVE THIRTY SECONDS TO COMPLY!" shouted an officer using a bullhorn.

"Saint Peter, here I come." said the masked man. He raised his weapon and fired. The roar of gunfire that erupted was deafening. Matt used the dead bodies to shield himself from the hail of bullets. Within seconds, it was over. Several officers came running over to assist.

"You alive?"

"I'll live. Thanks for not killing me."

"Who the hell are these guys?" asked a Sgt.

Matt knelt and removed the leader's face mask. He was shocked to see that it was Wilcox.

"Jesus," Matt said softly

"I've got somebody trapped in a store. His name is Gus."

"We'll take care of him. Head outside with the other survivors." said another officer.

"That was their plan, wasn't it? To pretend that they were hostages too? They all worked at the mall, I bet. They all had a reason for being here. They almost got away with it." said Matt

He walked outside and saw more officers and ambulances. There were news crews and reporters behind the police line. Matt didn't feel like talking to anyone. He just wanted to make sure Gus was alright and go home. He had never felt so tired in his life. He was able to call Matty and let her know he was alive. He also told her if she ever took another drink again, he was done with her.....and he meant it.

Matt called Gus that night and made certain he was okay, then he went home. He didn't really want to see or talk to anyone. He didn't even leave his house for a few weeks afterwards. Matty never even bothered to stop by. He figured she had made her choice and that was fine with him. He loved her, but the relationship was going nowhere.

Matt and Gus were offered a gigantic settlement for their *unfortunate experience in Sandy Hills Mall*. Four of the shooters were mall employees. Matt figured the mall would be closed permanently very quickly.

He stayed home, avoiding everyone. He had survivor's guilt. It can be brutal. He should be happy to be alive, but instead, he felt guilty. He was becoming borderline depressed. He called Gus and

asked to meet him in the now-empty Sandy Hills Mall parking lot. It was a cool, fall afternoon. Matt had a coffee cup in his hand and just wanted to talk to Gus, God how he missed their talks. He needed Gus now, more than ever.

"I don't know why I'm still alive. Why didn't they just kill me? I don't understand. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I can barely go to the bathroom. I just want to know why they didn't kill me like everyone else."

"They didn't kill you because I asked them not to," said Gus looking out the window.

"What? What do you mean, because you asked them to?"

"Matt. Remember what I said, about smart being able to read the writing on the wall? Well, I did. Your whole life just boils down to how you view the world. Through what kind of lens do you see the world? I've been looking through the wrong lens all these years. I've been doing it wrong. The Hand of God made me see that."

Matt was in shock. This was the last thing he ever expected to hear. He was hurt more than anything. He knew Gus, but at the same time, he didn't know Gus. He didn't know a goddamn thing about him.

"What are you saying, Gus? Are you saying you're a part of this group.....tell me that's not what you're saying.....TELL ME , GUS!" he said as he grabbed Gus's collar.

"Matt, it's important to be around people who think the same way you do. I just don't think you and I are going to see eye to eye on this one."

Matt let go of him and flung the van door open. He turned around and looked right at Gus. It was a perfect mixture of hurt and anger.....*and just a dash of shocked like hell.....the hardest punch is the one you don't see coming.*

"Fuck you, Gus. I don't ever want to see you again."

"Don't worry, Matt.....you won't. Next time, I'm not going to be able to save you. You're on your own. See, we're not just killers.....*we're your neighbors. You play golf with us, go to softball games with us, and have cookouts with us. We're everywhere Matt, and we're only getting stronger with each passing day. It's either God's way.....or no way.*"

"I mean it Gus, you and I are done. From this moment forward, I never want to hear or see you again. Am I clear?" asked Matt who was so upset, he was beginning to shake.

"Matt.....it's like the man says.....you got to know when hold em.....*and know when to fold em.*" said Gus smiling.

Matt slammed the door and walked back to his car. He had so many decisions to make and so little time to do it in. He knew the mall massacre was only a warm-up of what was to follow. He had to be ready.

Cause there ain't no telling when judgment day is coming for America. He just never thought it would come from people who thought they were God. Those are the really scary people.